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California Quail

Callipepla californica

by Z. Turnbull and S. Sells

The California quail, *Callipepla californica*, is one of America's most interesting game birds. It is easily recognizable by its loud calls and by the clump of feathers on its head called a topknot. Over the years, this bird has been given several common names, including California quail, valley quail, and California valley quail. It feeds on seeds, insects, and fruit depending on the time of year.



Photo: Joyce Gross

California quail are easily recognized by their unique topknot. The male's (left) coloring and topknot are more striking than the female's (right).



Where they live and why

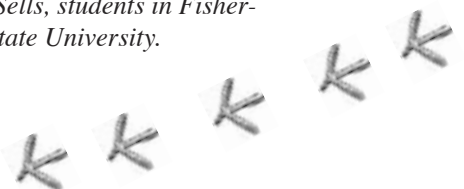
California quail adapt easily and can live in a lot of very different environments. Historically, the birds were located on the West Coast from southern Oregon to the Baja Peninsula in California.

Where quail are found, there is bound to be plentiful cover and water. California quail need these things in order to eat, drink, reproduce, and avoid predators. The California quail often is found in

brushy lowlands, valleys, low riparian or streamside areas, agricultural lands, and suburbs. They live on grassy slopes and in valley bottoms in dry desert climates. They also live in small woodland lots, valleys, grasslands, or clearcuts in wetter climates. Because quail need a constant supply of water, they often are found near water sources, especially in dry areas.

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Zach Turnbull and Sarah Sells, students in Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University.

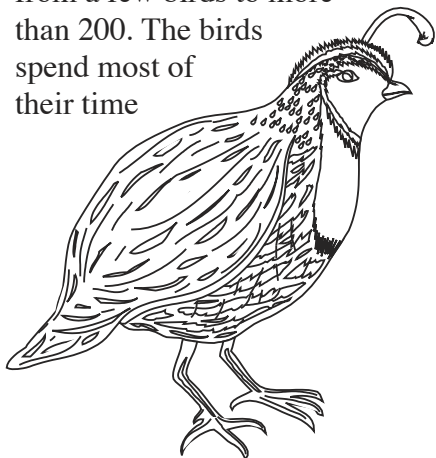


Species description

While its forward-curving, tear-drop-shaped topknot may be its most distinctive feature, the California quail is also recognized by its unique coloration. Males have a dark throat surrounded by a white outline, a gray chest, and a pattern on their bellies that looks a bit like scales on a fish. They have dark brown to gray sides. Females have a grayish brown head and a lighter, more speckled chest than the males. Quail living closer to the coast tend to have a browner coloration throughout their bodies. Quail are about 10 inches long.

Two species of quail are native to Oregon—California quail and mountain quail. They can be easily identified by the straight plume on mountain quail and the forward-curving topknot on California quail. Mountain quail usually are found at higher elevations and sometimes in drier habitats such as clearcuts and shrubby areas.

Quail are very social animals and live in coveys (family groups) in the winter. These groups can range from a few birds to more than 200. The birds spend most of their time



on the ground and fly only when they are alarmed.

They also may run when they

feel they are in danger. Running makes sense because flying out of cover leaves a bird exposed to avian (bird) predators such as hawks and falcons. Quail also can be victims of mammalian predators such as bobcats and coyotes, but they often outrun or out-manuever these predators in dense shrubs.

Since quail are such social animals, they vocalize often. The birds have a sharp cry used to locate one another, which sounds like a high-pitched “cu-ca-cow.” When quail are feeding and socializing, they often can be heard at great distances.

The female generally lays anywhere from 6 to 28 eggs at a time, usually in May to June. The eggs hatch in about 3 weeks. The chicks begin to fledge (leave the nest) after about 10 days, although they can walk just a few hours after hatching.

Quail are most visible in summer when broods (groups of young) have hatched and family groups are searching for food. Females are eager to find food because they have just completed incubating (sitting on eggs) for 3 weeks and have had little to eat.



Creating habitat



Food, water, and shelter are the basic requirements for all animals to survive, including quail. California quail are strongly associated with water and

cover. They feed on a variety of foods. Favorite quail foods that provide seeds, nuts, and berries include the following:

- Grasses and legumes (plants in the pea family)
- Shrubs such as snowberry, huckleberry, salal, blackberry, gooseberry, serviceberry, manzanita, and Oregon grape
- Trees such as ash, cascara, oaks, and hazelnut

Legumes (pealike) plants are one of their favorite types of plants. Planting these species gives quail a valuable food source and provides soil nutrients that help all animals and plants. Some good legume species to plant are native vetches such as milk vetch and sweet vetch, clover, and lupine.

Quail are ground feeders and are attracted to low platform feeders with cracked corn, millet, and grains such as oats, rye, wheat, and barley. Don't use platform feeders in areas where cats or other mammalian predators are common.

Many conservation agencies build artificial water sources called "bird guzzlers." These guzzlers collect water and store it so birds have access to water during dry times. You can make your own guzzlers by digging holes in the ground, lining them with waterproof material such as plastic, and then making a ramp into the hole to allow access to the water. The guzzlers will collect rainwater and dew.



You can create a quail roost by piling brush in a wire platform.

Quail need places to rest, called roost sites, and areas to nest. Large evergreen trees naturally provide this cover. When trees are not available, artificial roosts can be created by constructing large wire platforms approximately 6 to 8 feet off the ground. These roosts provide protection from most ground-based predators.

California quail use many forms of cover. Blackberry piles, slash timber, high grass and shrubs, and thick streamside vegetation can provide cover. Blackberry piles make excellent cover throughout the year. Unfortunately, common practices such as neatly trimming shrubs, mowing fields, and clearing out thick vegetation severely limit the ability of quail to thrive in an area because they have little cover to hide in. If possible, try to leave some areas of taller grass, especially near shrubs or trees.

Since it often is hard to view quail due to their preference for thick cover, you may want to provide separate patches of cover instead of large areas of cover. By providing patches of cover you provide different types of habitat for many species. Additionally, the open spaces allow you to view quail better.



Photo: Rick Harrison

In the winter, quail live in family groups called coveys. Coveys can have as many as 200 members!

Fun facts

- ✂ The California quail has been transplanted to places as far away as Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, and Germany.
- ✂ Sometimes quail have been seen using other bird nests, such as pheasant nests, in which to lay eggs.
- ✂ Young quail begin to fly when they are only 10 days old.

Learn more!

Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 3rd edition. 1999. National Geographic, Washington, DC.

“Woodland Fish and Wildlife: Quail on Small Woodlands,” 10 April, 2002 (<http://www.woodlandfishandwildlife.org/pubs/quail.pdf>).

Price, Z. 2000. “*Callipepla californica*.” Animal Diversity Web, accessed 10 April 2004 (http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Callipepla_californica.html).



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